

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Ghosts of Modernity* (University Press of Florida, 2010)

This review is late. The paperback edition of Rabaté's *The Ghosts of Modernity* came out in 2010, the hardcover more than ten years earlier, the original, French essays even before that. Certainly, there is no need at this point to recommend the book: it carries on its covers not just a blurb from Marjorie Perloff but excerpts from glowing reviews in *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Modern Language Quarterly*, the *South Atlantic Review*. But it's worth returning to discussion of the book on the e-pages of *Transnational Literature* because its particular relevance to our fields of study has not yet been widely discussed.

Usefully, *Ghosts* challenges views of modernism that limited it to (or emphasised it as) a solely European and American movement and moment. Declarations and approaches by figures like Eliot and Pound that specified Modernism to a particular moment or continent are not rejected (in fact, embraced) but informed by a sort of "spectrographic" analysis" (3) that opens up the way we view modernity and refuses to declare it dead. Rabaté, then, joins the recent and growing trend of theorists who re-imagine modernism in ways that allow for much more transnational and trans-historical participation.

Previous reviews have cited, praised, sometimes doubted the peculiar approach of the book. At moments it seems to be a series of essays circling a theme, or a new philosophy of tradition, or a work of literary psychoanalysis. It is all of these, and something else. The general idea is to unpack the hauntings that inspired modernism and to complicate claims of moving beyond modernism before addressing its spectres. Rabaté's chapters read different figures and moments, assembling an interesting (while not wholly unfamiliar) modernist lineage – Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Joyce, Breton, Broch, Beckett, Barthes, Riding, Stein, Beckett some more. The apparent focuses of the chapters and the description of the Crosscurrents series that published *Ghosts* make the modest claim to address the modernisms of previously 'separated and isolated Europes' (vii), but what results is no less than a vast expansion of Eliot's 'revisionist agenda' in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (xii). 'The transformation of the writer into a specter' becomes a defining characteristic of modernism (3), and this is a truly transnational possibility. Think Yoko Tawada. Think Kōbō Abe or José Saramago or Toni Morrison, any of whom could have a chapter in Rabaté's next edition of this book.

Haunting is, of course, not a new subject of literary inquiry. I think, for example, of Flannery O'Connor's wonderful 'Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,'¹ which defends Southern fiction from its unfair labels by claiming that the region is Christ-haunted in a peculiar way that influences all its writers, Christian or not. Rabaté's book expands upon (or perhaps combines) the previous ways we have described literary haunting. The 'ghostly writer ... imagines himself posthumous so as to mediate between his past and future and to judge the present' in, perhaps most noticeably, the chapter on Mallarmé's poems about his deceased son

¹ See Flannery O'Connor, 'Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction' in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. S. and R. Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970) 36-50.

(3). This means that modernism should not be reduced to the oft-quoted, Pound-ian effort to 'make it new'. According to Rabaté, 'the return of the past is too often overlooked because the declaration of the "new" is taken at face value' (3).

Of course, the declaration of the 'new' is not *always* taken at face value. Houston Baker, for example, certainly complicates the relationship between modernism and the new in his *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, which implies that Pound's brand of Anglo-American modernism was actually far less new in its relative tradition than what was happening in Harlem.² But, to be sure, this was (and is) the case as a general rule. Rabaté will continuously push against that historical rule in *Ghosts* while also pushing against national boundaries.

Ghosts is at its most 'transnational' when, for example, expanding Mallarmé's linguistic philosophy to all languages: a 'secret interaction between life and death ... regulates the evolution of every language' (112), tying that evolution to a sort of resuscitation-by-cultural-appropriation-and-exchange. It is a push and pull between the 'national' and the 'antinational' that evolves language and inspires poets (119-120). The hero of *Ghosts*, though, is Samuel Beckett, the 'Irish writer' who gets two chapters to himself and sneaks into quite a few others (150). Beckett cannot, of course, be simply described as an Irish writer. He was a self-translator, member of the French resistance, director of his plays in German, filmmaker in the U.S., and so on. Rabaté's selection of such a transnational figure does not feel accidental, and it aids him in his attempt to extend modernism beyond some of the narrower temporal and geographical parameters within which we tend to enclose it.

Modernism instead becomes a sort of 'a "continuous present"' (215), haunted by 'ghosts' who 'designate blind spots of knowledge' (220), and grounded in 'a refutation of [those] specters' (216). The theme, Rabaté acknowledges more than once, is at least as old as *Hamlet*. He finds in Beckett, though, 'the wish [...] to plunge the world into mourning, as if to darken its colors, so that a flash of light will be allowed to burst forth here and there' from, importantly, anywhere (232). The haunting of modernity is 'meta-historical' and 'endlessly generating ghosts ready to haunt an unwitting future' (230) – there is a kinship here with a kind of haunting discussed by more than one postcolonial thinker. *The Ghosts of Modernity* shows the benefits to a literature that makes a focus – in form and content – of those various hauntings.

Paul Ardoin

² Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).